

# How to be happy

Therapist James Earl asks whether we can learn to be happier.



We think instinctively that we must be able to will ourselves to be happy. 'Look on the bright side,' is

one of the common slogans that suggests we could be happier if we just thought positively. Are you glass half-full or glass half-empty? That question implies that happiness is just a state of mind – the same events can be seen as good or bad, it's just up to us.

But we know that external circumstances are often responsible for our happiness or unhappiness. For example, if I imagine winning the lottery, I can anticipate a surge of happiness; and if my beloved pet passes away, I know I would be sad. If my pet dies, wouldn't it be plainly insulting to say, 'Look on the bright side?'

External events outside our control are inevitably going to affect our level of happiness. Mental wellbeing is not about being happy 100% of the time, but about recognising that being unhappy some of the time is natural and normal in life.

At the same time, we know that our view of things does affect our mood. Some people seem to practice being downbeat. For example, you ask a friend, 'How are you?' and they answer, 'Could be worse,' or 'Still alive.' Likewise, if you're off to catch a bus with a friend, and they say, 'Just my luck, we'll probably miss it.'

Surely these 'scripts' are contributing to their own unhappiness? Negative everyday scripts are, after all, not a response to external events which make us happy or unhappy: they are being employed generally, and seem to colour every circumstance ('If I won the lottery, just my luck I'd lose the ticket. Or blow it all and become an alcoholic.')

This base position of pessimism may well look like an unconscious strategy to ward off disappointment. But – isn't life inherently

disappointing? After all, we are all heading in what can seem like the wrong direction, and time seems to be against us. Even more bleakly, we can reason that, if everything works out as it should, we will first lose our parents, and then leave our children alone in the world.

So there's enough in life to be unhappy about, and you might say that being unhappy is therefore reasonable. But let's take the example of losing a loved one. The grief we feel is actually the other face of love. (We don't generally mourn the passing of someone we have been indifferent to.) And loving someone, being in love – and much else that makes us happy – is as natural in life as suffering. Because we can feel love, we will also grieve: happiness and unhappiness seem bound together in human life.

## *'Happiness can only ever be part of the story'*

So, if we accept that happiness can only ever be part of the story, maybe we can reframe the question – not, can I learn to be happy? (as if it's an either/or) – but rather, can I learn to be happier?

I think the answer to that question is a resounding yes, and this is partly about creating favourable circumstances, and partly about fostering a particular mindset.

Let's look at the mindset issue first. If we start not with ourselves, but thinking about others, we can see that being gently optimistic is actually more use to our friends, family and colleagues than a thoroughgoing pessimism. Would I go to a friend for emotional support if they were grumpy,

## Happiness in two minutes

**1** Being sad when sad things happen is more a sign of mental wellbeing than trying to be happy all the time.

**2** Happiness is not winning the lottery, but building in micro-pleasures that elevate your base level.

**3** Be happy, not just for yourself, but as a help to others.

snappy and negative, or would I choose a more positive, relatively content person? So, seeking happiness is not selfish at all: you are more useful to other people.

This outer-directedness usually has the magic effect of increasing our sense of wellbeing. When we can give, we feel good. And the first act of giving is to be as happy as you can. Buddhism says, 'Protect yourself, so you may protect others.'

This leads to the idea of creating favourable circumstances to help ourselves to be happier. We may not be able to create the circumstance of winning the lottery. But we can create micro-pleasures through the day. Take a good novel to the coffee shop for half an hour. Ring your friend and arrange to go dancing. Walk round the park and marvel at the seasons. Write a poem. Enrol in that French conversation class. Go to an art gallery or the theatre. And wonder at the stories we all tell each other. 

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